

Saskatchewan Oil Spill Shows Need for Better Regulation, Move Away from Oil

by Daniel Cayley-Daoust and Emma Lui



In July, more than 200,000 litres of heavy oil mixed with diluents flowed uncontrollably down the North Saskatchewan River. It forced cities to close their drinking water intakes and impacted First Nations in Treaty 6 territory. Prince Albert was forced to draw water from the South Saskatchewan River 30 kilometres away – a river that is already over-extracted.

Within hours of the Husky Energy pipeline spill, Alberta Premier Rachel Notley and Saskatchewan Premier Brad Wall were both parroting the same bit of propaganda – that pipelines are the safest way to transport oil and we need more of them. The sheer audacity of these statements points to our level of addiction to oil, and it isn't good.

Though proponents claim pipelines are the so-called "safest" method of transporting oil, we have seen 8,360 spills in Saskatchewan since 2006, of which Husky is responsible for 1,463. This isn't isolated to Saskatchewan either – there have been 28,666 crude oil spills in Alberta in the last 37 years. How is this considered safe?

The problem is that there are far too many spills from both rail and pipelines. The answer to this is twofold: we need to regulate existing pipelines and rail transport better, and we need to overcome our addiction to oil and begin the transition away from fossil fuels.

The Trudeau government has committed to reviewing environmental and

freshwater legislation this fall. This should be an opportunity to develop stronger regulations and prevent environmental disasters of this magnitude in the future. By gutting the Fisheries Act, the Navigable Waters Protection Act, the Environmental Assessment Act and the National Energy Board Act, the Harper government opened up lakes and rivers to more risk. The new regulations need to be stronger and more effective in regulating and evaluating industrial projects in Canada that can have an impact on our environment.

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In the meantime, we need to demand an end to this pipeline fixation. To many, stopping the expansion of the oil industry and reducing our consumption may sound counter-intuitive because of the impression that we are trapped, and that our economy needs more oil and more pipelines to get out of its current economic slump.

But it is just that: a trap, a sign of our addiction. And both Notley and Wall are entrenching themselves deeper into this addiction by going to bat for an industry that is quickly failing globally. Transitioning and diversifying

our economy is not an easy task, but it is an essential task. The longer we wait, the harder it will be. As one newspaper columnist recently pointed out, Premier Wall is doing an awful job of diversifying the Saskatchewan economy and seems able only to promote oil interests. Jobs are being lost in education, film and other non-renewable resource industries, not just in the oil industry.

Low oil prices and the global movement towards alternatives present an opportunity that needs to be seized immediately – an opportunity that will create jobs and won't pollute our waters. Internationally, investments in renewable energy have recently surpassed investments in new fossil fuel projects, but Canada is lagging behind. Communities and families are already implementing their own alternatives, but it's time for our governments to step up to the plate and support this transition and encourage low-carbon climate jobs.

The Husky Energy oil spill is a catastrophe and it is also a reality check. It is one spill too many, and while we work towards overcoming our dependency on oil, we need to do all we can to prevent future catastrophes – be they by pipeline or by train, as it is clearer than ever that industry cannot be trusted to do this on its own.

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